DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 245 479 EC 162 839

AUTHOR Shaw, Stan F.
TITLE A Preservice Perspective on Quality Training in Special Education.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (62nd, Washington, DC, April 23-27, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Diagnostic Teaching; *Disabilities; Higher Education; *Preservice Teacher Education; Professional Education; Program Descriptions; *Special Education Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *University of Connecticut

ABSTRACT

The University of Connecticut's undergraduate special education program, which uses the prescriptive teaching approach to train special education teachers, is described. Student support services that help "high risk" candidates succeed in a demanding program are outlined. Program elements and evaluation criteria that provide students with the skills needed to be competent professionals are presented. A particular focus is on program components which prepare graduates for the stressful realities facing special educators in the 1980's. Finally, efforts in the area of student evaluation are considered. (Author/SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED245479

A PRESERVICE PERSPECTIVE ON QUALITY TRAINING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Stan F. Shaw, Ed.D.
Professor of Education
The University of Connecticut
Storrs, Connecticut 06268

Paper presented at the
Convention of the Council for Exceptional
Children, Washington, D.C., April 25, 1984

EC162839

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Stan F. Shaw
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ABSTRACT

A PRESERVICE PERSPECTIVE ON QUALITY
TRAINING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Given the general reduction in both the quantity and quality of candidates entering special education training programs, the integrity of such programs needs to be enhanced. This paper describes the efforts of one teacher training program to train superior special education teachers. Student support services which help "high risk" candidates succeed in a demanding program are outlined. Program elements and evaluation criteria which provide students with the skills to be competent professionals are presented. A particular focus is on program components which prepare graduates for the stressful realities facing special educators in the 1980's.

A PRESERVICE PERSPECTIVE ON QUALITY TRAINING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Teacher preparation in special education is facing unique challenges in coming years. We are faced with a diminishing pool of candidates for teacher education programs. This is resulting in reductions in both the quality and quantity of students entering training programs. At the same time, the growing responsibilities of special educators including assessment, consultation, placement team decision making, and parent counseling, in addition to teaching more diverse and severely handicapped students, requires an extremely competent and well trained professional.

Special education teacher educators must deal directly with the issue of quality teacher training. The simplistic solutions we read almost daily in the newspapers must not be ignored but must be countered with data based alternatives. Let me begin with some issues of philosophy.

TRAINING PHILOSOPHY

No educator can be opposed to raising standards for teachers. However, we may have lost sight of our special education roots as we have been continually bombarded with political rhetoric about raising entrance requirements for teacher training programs. Not only can such a move further diminish the pool of teacher training candidates (particularly those from minority populations) but it could result in the return of emergency teaching certifi-

cates and the proliferation of New Jersey's plan to hire teachers off the streets and do teacher training on the job. This approach flies in the face of special education research over the last two decades which indicates that:

- -good programs can change student performance and student behavior
- -labels, handicaps and cultural background are not acceptable determinants for acceptance to school (read college)
- -entering behaviors are the basis for developing and modifying programs
- -"high risk" students can succeed given an intensive instructional program

My recommendation is not that we ignore discussions of standards but that we re-focus the debate to issues of developing programs for students with lower abilities and, more important, implementing more rigorous graduation and certification requirements for our programs. An appropriate philosophical orientation is one which states that we don't need anymore bad special educators or that we will not certify any special educator who we would not want teaching our own children.

Another philosophical orientation which special education trainers need to accept is that we can't do it all at the pre-service level. No special educator who receives initial certification should believe that the training process is complete. Special education technology is changing too rapidly for a trainer or student to believe that what is said in 1984 will still be

valid in 1986. Training programs need to impart instructional strategies and evaluation processes in addition to specific approaches or assessment instruments. Special educators need to leave training programs with more questions than answers.

Training programs also need to encourage an orientation which specifies that instruction of handicapped students is only one aspect of the special educators role. Competencies in a quality program must include writing thorough educational evaluations using formal and informal assessments, participation in and running placement team meetings including writing effective IEP's, collaborating with regular classroom teachers and related services personnel and working with parents. These competencies must be taught and practiced in situations and settings which provide the best opportunity for both mastery and generalizability. Most of these competencies relate to understanding the politics of schools and dealing with people. Teacher trainers must accept that time spent dealing with school survival issues can be as producting as time spent writing IEP's or learning instructional strategies. Therefore, prospective special educators must not only be made aware of what is out there in the real world, but also what to do about it in order to survive. We simply cannot afford to spend thousands of hours training competent professionals so they can quit in the middle of their first year, or worse, face each day in the schools with resentment, frustration, or disillusionment.

Preservice students certainly must be told what the law, learning theory, research and professional ethics indicate is appropriate diagnosis, instruction, and programing for handicapped students. Of equal importance, however, is

knowing what is actually happening in the schools and how to bridge that gap between theory (what should be) and practice (what is).

The remainder of this paper will focus on the University of Connecticut's undergraduate special education program. Program elements which we feel have been effective in training superior special educators will be discussed.

PROGRAM CONTENT

The hallmark of our program is the use of a prescriptive teaching approach which gives our students a systematic process for evaluating any instructional program implemented. It changes the emphasis from teaching specific instructional or curricular strategies to developing procedures for specifying objectives, assessing student performance and modifying instructional approaches based upon this educational data. Given this systematic evaluation process students are literally bombarded with a diverse array of instructional, curricular and diagnostic approaches. Students may go from one class to the next hearing very different and sometimes almost conflicting information. The end result is that diversity is respected, students are provided a wealth of alternatives and are, early in their careers, required to make data-based decisions about which approach to use in any specific situation.

Our essentially non-categorical program includes generic courses on instruction, diagnosis and management. Each of these courses is part of a professional semester. Coursework is built around four weeks of full time student teaching in the middle of the semester. The focus of these courses can then be on the demonstration of skills learned in this applied setting. The following are examples of these efforts:

*PRACTICAL ASSIGNMENTS

Activities which require trainees to indicate knowledge are demonstrated in practical settings as in these examples: (a) defend your programming ideas to your disgruntled principal, (b) explain learning disability diagnosis and programing in response to a letter from a parent, and (c) justify your approach to diagnosis as compared to another based on a question at a job interview.

*DEBATE

It is important for special educators to be aware of "alternative therapies" such as the Kaiser-Permanente diet. A debate in which the professor plays the president of the local Feingold Association and the students attempt to be rational, data based educators has often resulted in much fireworks and a significant growth in terms of insight and maturity for the students. This activity is followed by the students writing an explanation of their position on alternative therapies.

*DEMONSTRATE SKILL IN SITU

Giving students the competence to write an IEP or complete an educational evaluation is most important. Providing them with the opportunity to present and defend their IEP or educational evaluation on a real child at a real placement team meeting is even more productive.

Our program's ability to provide these "real world" experiences is based on the quality of instructional personnel. All undergraduate courses are taught by full time faculty who are involved in field based activities. In fact, almost every undergraduate special education course is taught by a tenured full professor. These faculty members are currently working in the schools as State Hearing Officers, test

developers, diagnosticians, teachers of handicapped students, developers of model special education programs, parent advocates and program evaluators. We also find that dealing with activities related to the following school survival issues can be helpful in providing preservice special educators success in negotiating the political and professional environment of the school or institution.

1. Critical variables in finding/selecting a job conducive to professional growth and personal mental health.
2. The pro's and con's of living in the area where you work.
3. Finding or developing personal/professional support groups.
4. What should I do the first day of school.....first week..... first month?
5. Dealing with administrators, fellow special services personnel, regular classroom teachers, janitors, etc.
6. How to listen and how to communicate.
7. Assessing the informal and formal power structure of a school.

In addition to the very practical elements described above, we require students to take a minimum of twenty-four credits in the related areas of psychology, speech and human development. Students typically select courses in learning, child development, abnormal psychology, speech and language acquisition and counseling. This knowledge base is a very helpful balance to the skills provided in their special education coursework.

Through our Division of Personnel Preparation Training Grant we provide systematic student support services for "high risk" students. The services,

including academic, personal and professional support, are intended to enable all our special education candidates, regardless of entering attributes, to meet the rigorous standards set for our graduates. Our coordinator of student support services does any necessary assessment of our trainees, plans support programs in areas such as

*dealing with specific problems in an academic course

*providing general strategies in test taking, outlining, time management, study skills, and writing

*overcoming professional deficiencies in diagnosis, behavior management or curriculum development

*ameliorating inter-personal, social or adjustment problems

Strategies used to meet these needs include direct service by the coordinator, providing tutors, referral to campus wide student support services (e.g., writing lab, counseling center), consulting with the student's professor(s) and developing additional or alternative program elements (e.g., providing a special fieldwork assignment for a blind trainee). We have found these services to be very productive but will have to wait until a later date to report hard data regarding effectiveness and discuss implications for recruitment and retention of "high risk" students.

The last program component I want to discuss is fieldwork. We could all agree that early and varied fieldwork opportunities are key elements of a good program. I would like to outline some quality indicators of our outstanding fieldwork experiences.

*fieldwork opportunities progress from observation, to tutorial to short term to long term experiences

culminating in total responsibility for a special education setting

*students have opportunities to select from a broad range of settings including populations 0-21, mildly to profoundly handicapped, public school to institutional setting

*cooperating teachers are carefully selected master teachers who understand the program, are trained and provided specific evaluation criteria and receive ongoing support from the University

*roles of student teachers are specified to include the broad range of responsibilities including instruction, curriculum development, diagnosis, collaboration with other school personnel, involvement in placement team meetings and parent interaction

*the program coordinator attempts to individually match student teachers and cooperating teachers in terms of interests, styles, expectations and personality

EVALUATION

The evaluation of student competence is a critical issue in these days of public scrutiny of educators. In addition, program evaluation data is critical in making the ongoing modifications necessary to keep a program up-to-date. The following section describes our efforts in these areas.

Student Evaluation

Student evaluation is totally based on a mastery model. Each methods course and fieldwork experience has specified objectives on which the student is evaluated. Grades in these courses are typically based on a contract system or other performance based evaluation criteria. Very often the evaluation is based on a product such as an IEP, case study or educational evaluation. The student teaching evaluation is essentially a specification of the competencies required of special educators in curriculum planning, assessment, instruction and classroom management. Additional competencies can be specified and evaluated based on individual trainee needs or on the needs of the student teaching site.

The critical element in student evaluation is our determination to only certify competent special educators. To that end we have not certified more than 10% of each graduating class over the last three years. Students who are unwilling or unable to meet the rigorous standards we set are graduated without certification or counselled into other majors. We also provide trainees with additional or alternative student teaching and instructional opportunities if they are willing to work toward competence. For example, next fall we will have at least two student teachers who are scheduled to finish the program one to two years late. In the interim they have been involved in coursework, modified fieldwork experiences and counselling in order to provide them with the skills they need to succeed as special educators. Although we have been threatened with legal action on numerous occasions, we have never had any problem because all our instructors, super-

visors and cooperating teachers are skilled data collectors. We can substantiate our denial of certification if we have to.

Program Evaluation

We implement many activities to assess the effectiveness of our program. Typical elements include course and supervisor evaluations by students, employment survey and follow-up with employers. Over the last three years this data has demonstrated that over 90% of our graduates are employed as special educators. In addition, employers of our graduates have compared their skills with teachers with Master's degrees and teaching experience. A new evaluation strategy we've used very successfully with our programs is an impartial on-site evaluation. The insight one gets from the perceptions of a knowledgable outsider have proven very beneficial.

Beyond simply collecting data there must be a commitment to modify the program based upon this information. Our program, though relatively stable over the last ten years, has undergone numerous enhancements. We've added a second reading course, additional fieldwork, a regular education student teaching experience and a professional semester. We are now in the process of developing severely handicapped and micro-computer components. I believe that a special education program needs to be evaluated and modified on an ongoing basis if it is to continue to meet the needs of its students in this rapidly changing field.

CONCLUSION

Although the University of Connecticut was graduating outstanding special educators in the 1970's, I did not know whether or not we had an outstanding training program. When you select one candidate from every five applicants

and have the best students in the University, it is hard to determine the efficacy of the training program. Now, special education teacher trainers face a responsibility similar to the one our trainees face when they step into a special education classroom. We must provide a well structured, reality based instructional program which will enable a generally less qualified candidate to meet the rigorous demands of the world of work. This is the challenge for the 1980's which special education teacher trainers must meet. I believe we will continue to demonstrate that intensive instructional programs can successfully modify student behavior. I look forward to working with you and sharing data on our efforts during the ensuing years.